

Reborn Fox Will Host 'Chorus Line,' 'Wiz'

By Helen C. Smith
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The specter of the wrecking ball swinging over the turrets of the Fox Theatre has been laid to rest, and more and even better shows are on the schedule. Such blockbusters as "Chorus Line" and "The Wiz" are already booked into the once-threatened Fox for lengthy stays late this year.

The emergency mortgage on the Fox, a building designated as a National Historic Landmark, was paid off Monday at high noon. The news was announced to an elated audience, many of whom were hugging each other, in the Grand Salon of the theater Tuesday by Beauchamp Carr, president of the board of trustees of Atlanta Landmarks, Inc.

Only Ted Stevens, the general manager of the Fox remained relatively impassive. "I'm pleased, of course," said Stevens, "but I can't get too excited because I knew it would happen all along. I couldn't have operated the Fox as a business, booking well beyond the mortgage due date if I hadn't be-

lieved that."

Stevens said at least 100 events are booked after June 28, the month the mortgage became due. Some are scheduled as late as 1981. Only one group, a barbershop quartet, dropped out because of the former possibility that the Fox might not be saved.

"Chorus Line" and "The Wiz" will be the major national touring company productions, Stevens said. This will mark the first time that such companies (as opposed to bus and truck shows) will play Atlanta since Lauren Bacall appeared here in "Applause" in 1971.

To celebrate the saving of the Fox, four months before deadline, Landmarks will hold a free, open house Easter Sunday, March 26, from 1 to 5 p.m. Bob Van Camp, the master of the "Mighty Mo," the most powerful theater organ in the world, will play a concert.

A donation by Gov. George Busbee last week of \$100,000 put the campaign to save the Fox over the top in its climb out of the pits. Previously, more than 7,000 donations,

ranging from small gifts to those as large as \$400,000, had helped pay off not only the \$1.8 million principal of the mortgage but also \$350,000 in interest.

Landmarks, a non-profit organization, now owns the Fox free and clear. The building no longer faces the threat of demolition. The mortgage had been guaranteed by the building's former owners, a group of movie theater operators. If Landmarks had failed to retire the mortgage, the building would have reverted to the former owners, who would have demolished it.

The fund drive began in June 1975, when it purchased the building with funds from an emergency mortgage. The repayment deadline was June 25, 1978.

Carr expressed his appreciation to all the donors and the many volunteers who have helped make the campaign a success.

"We are particularly indebted," he said, "to Ted Stevens and Joe Patten for operating the Fox in such an outstanding fashion



Staff Photo

Wrecking Ball Gone; Shows Planned Until 1981

while the rest of us were out asking for donations. Their ability to make the Fox operate on a self-sustaining basis proved how practical the building is. Without them, it could not have been saved."

The Save-the-Fox campaign moved into high gear in February 1977, when an anonymous donor pledged \$400,000 on the condition the rest of the money be raised to retire the mortgage. In June, the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, awarded Landmarks another challenge grant, for \$300,000, which had to be matched three-to-one.

In response to this, other local anonymous donors pledged \$250,000 and another \$400,000. Four other gifts of \$100,000 and up have been received from U.S. Ambassador to Belgium Anne Cox Chambers and the James M. Cox Foundation of Georgia; from David, Helen and Marion Woodward Fund; from the State of Georgia, department of natural resources national park service funding; and from another anonymous donor. Numerous other foundations, businesses and individuals made still other major gifts.

With the exception of such specific donations as the \$700,000 from city government to repair a large portion of the roof, all the donations so far have been used to pay off the Fox mortgage.

Now the restoration begins. All future benefit performances for the Fox and any additional donations will be used to refurbish and restore the theater to its original splendor, said Patten, the theater's technical director.

"The standard for this work will be to restore the building as much as possible to its original 1929 condition and to make no changes in design," said Patten.

Patten said he now hopes to raise enough money to replace the carpet and to continue painting, repairing and reupholstering. A piece of the original carpet, which incorporated some of the features of the building into its design, was found. An attempt to have that duplicated is being made. Bids are out but there is no cost estimate at present.

To help raise money for the renovation, Arthur Fiedler will return to the Fox April 12 to conduct the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in another "Pops for the Fox" concert. Fiedler, who conducted here last year to a house sold out a week before the concert, is a strong supporter of the Fox.

Other celebrities have frequently lent their support, both by benefit performances and through other means. Helen Hayes, one of the great ladies of the American stage, went on the air to proclaim "We must save the Fox."

Though the wrecking ball has lost its swing, some monies are still to be paid on the emergency mortgage. An Atlanta bank made a loan to cover the shortfall in the cash available. The loan is fully covered by pledges, however, and will be retired as the pledges pay out, said Carr.

Already, some restoration has been done. The Grand Salon's stained-glass skylight, for example, has been repaired, and the walls have been painted. There are new cushions and upholstery on the original seats in the loge and work is to progress on those in the dress circle and the balcony, said Patten.

"We plan to continue on through," said Patten, "and maybe restore the house to its original seating capacity."

The Fox once sat 4,462 people. Its capacity is now 3,933. At one point the original orchestra seats were removed and replaced by larger ones that provided more spacing between seats and between aisles.

The Fox has also acquired the elaborate sound system and motion picture equipment from Loew's Grand, the theater on Peachtree Street which was the scene of the premiere of "Gone With the Wind" and which recently burned and subsequently demolished. This will enable the Fox to show some movies of "a special nature, like the finer classics," said Patten.